

Administration of Barack Obama, 2015

The President's News Conference With President Ashraf Ghani Ahmadzai of Afghanistan

March 24, 2015

Crash of Germanwings Flight 4U9525 Near Digne-les-Bains, France

President Obama. Good afternoon, everybody. Please have a seat. Before I begin, I want to say that our thoughts and our prayers are with our friends in Europe, especially the people of Germany and Spain, following a terrible airplane crash in France. It's particularly heartbreaking because it apparently includes the loss of so many children, some of them infants.

I called German Chancellor Merkel, and I hope to speak with President Rajoy of Spain later today, to express the condolences of the American people and to offer whatever assistance that we can as they investigate what has proven to be an awful tragedy. Our teams are in close contact, and we're working to confirm how many Americans may have been on board. Germany and Spain are among our strongest allies in the world, and our message to them is that, as their steadfast friend and ally, America stands with them at this moment of sorrow.

Afghanistan-U.S. Relations

President Obama. Now, it is a great pleasure to welcome President Ghani to the White House. As many of you know, President Ghani spent time here in the United States, as a student and as a scholar. He happened to go to Columbia University, where we both studied, and then spent time at the World Bank just down the street from here. And so his life reflects, in many ways, the friendship and mutual respect between Americans and Afghans. And in that spirit, Mr. President, I want to extend to you the warmest of welcomes.

President Ghani's presence here today, along with Chief Executive Abdullah, underscores Afghans'—Afghanistan's progress. In last year's election, millions of Afghans defied the threats from the Taliban and bravely cast their ballots. In the spirit of compromise and putting their interests behind the interests of the nation, President Ghani and Dr. Abdullah ensured the first peaceful and democratic transfer of power in Afghanistan's history. And together, they now lead a national unity Government that reflects the diversity, the strength and the determination of the Afghan people.

Their Government signed the bilateral security agreement between our two countries, and on December 31, after more than 13 years, America's combat mission in Afghanistan came to a responsible end. Afghan forces now have full responsibility for security across their country. Some 330,000 Afghans serve in the police and security forces, and they are making extraordinary sacrifices, fighting and often dying for their country, and they continue to grow stronger month by month.

Today we honor the many Afghans—men, women, and children—who have given their lives for their country. We salute the more than 2,200 Americans, patriots who made the ultimate sacrifice in Afghanistan, and the many more who were wounded. This morning President Ghani and Dr. Abdullah visited Arlington National Cemetery to pay their respects to our fallen heroes. We are grateful for that gesture of gratitude, and we know it meant a lot to

the families as well. We'll see the bonds again between our people on display when President Ghani has an opportunity to address Congress tomorrow.

So with a new Government in Afghanistan and with the end of our combat mission, this visit is an opportunity to begin a new chapter between our two nations. President Ghani and Dr. Abdullah, I thank you both for your strong support of the partnership between our two nations. And yesterday they had a chance to spend time at Camp David with our respective teams and had excellent discussions on how we can move forward together. Today, guided by our strategic partnership, we focused on several areas.

First, we agreed to continue to keep in place our close security cooperation. Afghanistan remains a very dangerous place, and insurgents still launch attacks, including cowardly suicide bombings against civilians. President Ghani is pursuing reforms to further strengthen Afghan security forces, including respect for human rights. And as part of the ongoing NATO mission, the United States will continue to train, advise, and assist Afghan security forces.

As we announced yesterday, we'll work with Congress on funding to sustain 352,000 Afghan police and troops through 2017. At the same time, we'll continue to conduct targeted counterterrorism operations, and we'll—we agreed to maintain a dialogue on our counterterrorism partnership in the years ahead.

Now, at our peak 4 years ago, the United States had more than 100,000 troops in Afghanistan. In support of today's narrow missions, we have just under 10,000 troops there. Last year, I announced a timeline for drawing down our forces further, and I've made it clear that we're determined to preserve the gains our troops have won. Now, President Ghani has requested some flexibility on our drawdown timelines. I've consulted with General Campbell in Afghanistan and my national security team, and I've decided that we will maintain our current posture of 9,800 troops through the end of this year.

The specific trajectory of the 2016 drawdown will be established later this year to enable our final consolidation to a Kabul-based Embassy presence by the end of 2016. Now, this flexibility reflects our reinvigorated partnership with Afghanistan, which is aimed at making Afghanistan secure and preventing it from being used to launch terrorist attacks. Reconciliation and a political settlement remain the surest way to achieve the full drawdown of U.S. and foreign troops from Afghanistan in a way that safeguards international interests and peace in Afghanistan, as well as U.S. national security interests.

Second, and since the best way to ensure Afghanistan's progress is a political settlement, we're going to continue to support an Afghan-led reconciliation process. President Ghani, you've shown bold leadership in reaching out to Pakistan, which is critical to the pursuit of peace. Afghanistan and the United States agree on what the Taliban must do, which is break with Al Qaida, renounce violence, and abide by Afghan laws, including the protections for women and minorities.

Third, we'll continue to support the national unity Government in its efforts to truly serve the Afghan people. We discussed the urgent need, with Parliament's support, to seat a full Cabinet. President Ghani, in your Inaugural Address you spoke forcefully about the need to combat corruption, uphold rule of law, and strengthen democratic institutions, and the United States very much commends you for those efforts. And you moved many Afghans with your eloquent tribute to your wife and partner, First Lady Rula Ghani. America will continue to be your partner in advancing the rights and dignity of all Afghans, including women and girls.

And finally, we'll continue to support the development that underpins stability and improves the lives of the Afghan people. Over the years, there have been major gains: dramatic improvements in public health, life expectancy, literacy, including for millions of girls who are in school. President Ghani is a leading expert on development, and I've been impressed by the reforms that he's pursuing to make Afghanistan more self-reliant. He wants to empower Afghans in these efforts, and that's why, under the new development partnership that we announced yesterday, U.S. economic assistance will increasingly go through Afghan institutions, in support of Afghan priorities, with an emphasis on accountability, performance, and achieving results.

In closing, I'd note that, as many of you know, President Ghani is, by training, an anthropologist, as was my mother. It's been said that "the purpose of anthropology is to make the world safe for human differences." Afghanistan, and our world, is marked by incredible diversity and differences of history and culture and faiths. But I believe that the progress that we've made in this visit will advance the goal for which so many of your citizens, Mr. President, have sacrificed over the years: the goal of making our two countries and the world safer.

President Ghani, Chief Executive Abdullah, thank you both for your leadership and your partnership. America's combat mission in Afghanistan may be over, but our commitment to the Afghanistan people, that will endure.

President Ghani.

President Ghani. [Inaudible] President Obama, first of all, I'd like to express the deep sympathies of the Government and the people of Afghanistan to German and Spanish families and governments. Both of these countries took part in the ISAF coalition. They have made major commitments, and they have sacrificed in Afghanistan.

I'd like to take this opportunity to pay tribute to those common sacrifices and, simultaneously, take the opportunity to pay tribute to the 2,215 American service men and women who made—paid the ultimate sacrifice; more than 22,000 American soldiers who have been wounded in action; civilians, numerous contractors, and others. You stood shoulder to shoulder with us, and I'd like to say thank you.

I would also like to thank the American taxpayer for his and her hard-earned dollars that have enabled us. Yesterday, at the Pentagon, I saw a young girl; her name is Reese. And her father came out of retirement, out of reserve, to serve again in Afghanistan. She is sending a care package every week to her father. And I want to thank her and the fathers of all other American children who are making sure that their parents are helping us and standing next to us.

Reese, I promised, now has 3 million Afghan sisters in school. And those sisters are dreaming of achievements that whatever career path, and hopefully, one day we'll see an Afghan woman President. It should not be soon—as not be too far, because we soon—we now have four women in the Cabinet. That's 20 percent of our Cabinet are women. I hope that some other countries will match us. *[Laughter]* That we are intent.

And thank you for the reference to Afghanistan's First Lady. She was delighted that—to have an opportunity to speak to Mrs. Obama. She has devoted her life to the most underprivileged of Afghans, and all of us are committed to make sure that 36 percent of Afghans that live below poverty will have—will live with dignity and one day, not in the distant future, see prosperity.

Dr. Abdullah and I are grateful for the reception that you've accorded us, Mr. President. Your national security team has gone out of its way to engage in intensive, comprehensive discussion, and both of us would like to thank Secretary Kerry for the loss of hours of sleep we caused you—[laughter]—and for your very able diplomacy and catalyzing the unity that today is on display. The Government of national unity is going to be an enduring phenomena, and both of us stand for the unity against the divisions that our opponents and enemies had hoped for.

This unity is a reflection of the desire of the Afghan public to overcome the last 200 years of our political history, where rarely public figures have chosen the country before themselves. We are committed in this regard to emulate the Founding Fathers and Mothers of the United States, where national interest would stand above personal or factional interests.

Afghans—I'm glad that the security transition is completed. You fulfilled your promise to your people, and we fulfilled our promise to our people. Afghans, for millennia, have guarded our homeland and have a reputation for serving. The last years were an exception, when we needed help, and we're grateful that help was provided, but we are pleased that the security transition has been met according to the timeline that you set. Today, the combat role of the United States in Afghanistan is over.

But the train, advise, and assist mission is a vital part of our collective interests and collective endeavors. Tragedy brought us together; interests now unite us. And we can assure you that the Government of national unity has revitalized the partnership and looks at this partnership with the United States as foundational not just for Afghanistan's stability, but for regional and global stability.

Much binds us together, and the flexibility that has been provided for 2015 will be used to accelerate reforms, to ensure that the Afghan National Security Forces are much better led, equipped, trained, and are focused on their fundamental mission.

I'm pleased to say that the departure of 120,000 international troops has not brought about the security gap or the collapse that was often anticipated. I'd like to pay tribute at this moment to the continuous sacrifice of the Afghan security forces, civilians, and a patriotic nation.

Our patriotism is part of, simultaneously, our internationalism. We are unique in that we have embraced democratic ways. We are very proud of our Islamic civilization, but it is an Islam that is truly in dialogue with the world. And we have the capacity to speak truth to terror. They do not speak for Islam. We do. And it's the genuine Islam that is interested in dialogue between civilizations and cooperation and endeavor forward.

On regional cooperation, we have taken bold and novel steps; we do hope that these steps would be reciprocated, because the threats that exist, the changing ecology of terror, are making it imperative that all governments cooperate with each other.

Today, the state system as we have known it is under attack. These are not classic national liberation movements; these are destructive, nihilistic movements. And it's essential that we confront them with vigor and determination. But we must differentiate between those and Afghan citizens who desire peace.

Any political difference, anything that divides us must be resolved politically, and we have shown the wisdom and determination that we can arrive at unity of purpose. So our

commitment to peace is clear. What we require is reciprocity so that Afghan patriots will choose the country over themselves and unite in resolving whatever might be that divides us.

But we will not have peace with those who use our territory as a proxy for other purposes, as a battleground for alien forces, or as a launching pad for global terrorism.

This trip has provided us an opportunity to have a comprehensive overview, and I again want to express thank you for your commitment to submit a bill to Congress for support of our security forces 2017.

There's much work that lies ahead of us. And the flexibility that has been provided will be used to maximum effect to accelerate reforms to ensure that our security forces honor human rights; that they internalize the practices that binds an army, a police force, a secret service to the people. Violence against our people has no place within our security culture, and we will overcome those types of legacies.

It's again a pleasure to be standing next to a graduate of Columbia University. [Laughter] There's much that unites us. And your mother was an inspiration to us. I understand that the President of the World Bank actually got the job because she—he invoked your mother's teachings to convince you that an anthropologist could lead the World Bank. So thank you for according him that rare opportunity.

President Obama. He's doing a great job.

The—all right, with that, let's take a couple questions. Leo Shane, Military Times.

Q. Thank you, Mr. President. This is on, right?

President Obama. Yes, it's on. I can hear you.

U.S. Troop Levels in Afghanistan/U.S. Military Operations in Afghanistan/U.S. Defense Spending

Q. With the increased slowdown in the drawdown here, we're looking at more risk, more danger for U.S. troops that are in Afghanistan. How do you justify that to them? How do you tell them that the mission is still worth it? And how do you assure them that there is an end coming to this mission?

And for President Ghani, you've talked the last couple days a lot about the sacrifice of U.S. troops. You were at Arlington earlier today. How do you tell them that this continued sacrifice will be worth it to them as well?

President Obama. Well, first of all, I think it's important, Leo, to remember the timeline for a withdrawal down to a Embassy-centered presence, a normalization of our presence in Afghanistan remains the end of 2016. So that hasn't changed. Our transition out of a combat role has not changed.

Now, I am the first to say that as long as our men and women in uniform are serving in Afghanistan, there are risks involved. It's a dangerous place. Casualties have come down precipitously as we've engaged in the drawdown. It's been over 90 days since two Americans were killed in Afghanistan. That has occurred precisely because we're not in a combat role. And I think it is worth noting the significant casualties that the Afghan security services have incurred. As we've drawn down, they've stood up, and they're fighting. And they're fighting with courage and tenacity, and they're getting better month by month.

But you can't minimize the sacrifices that our military families make. It means some folks are going to be rotating back into Afghanistan for a few extra months relative to what otherwise would have been the case. We're essentially moving the drawdown pace over to the right for several months, in part to compensate for the lengthy period it took for Government formation; in part because we want to make sure that we're doing everything we can to help Afghan security forces succeed so we don't have to go back, so we don't have to respond in an emergency because counterterrorist—or because terrorist activities are being launched out of Afghanistan.

We're on the path to do that, and it was my assessment as Commander in Chief that it made sense for us to provide a few extra months for us to be able to help on things like logistics, making sure that equipment is not just in place, but it's also used properly; that the training and advising and strategic input that's been provided continues through this fighting season, in part so that President Karzai [Ghani],^{*} who has taken on the mantle of Commander in Chief in a way that we have not seen in the past from an Afghan President, can do a serious review and can assess here is where our strengths are, here's where our weaknesses are, and we can proceed with more effective joint planning going forward.

So the bottom line is our men and women in uniform make enormous sacrifices. Their families do too; they serve alongside them. This will mean that there are going to be some of our folks who are in Afghanistan under the new schedule who would have been home. But it is important to keep in perspective, first of all, that we've gone down from 100,000 down to under 10,000; that they are not on the front lines because they're not in a combat role. We are doing all that we can do to make sure that force protection is a priority for those who are in Afghanistan. And the date for us to have completed our drawdown will not change.

But it is my judgment, it's the judgment of General Campbell and others who are on the ground, that providing this additional timeframe during this fighting season for us to be able to help the Afghan security forces succeed is well worth it. And in that sense, once again, we are asking our men and women in uniform to fight on behalf of our freedom and on behalf of a more orderly world.

It does, perhaps, raise one thought, which is, right now there's a debate going up on Capitol Hill about budgets. This would be a good time for my friends up on Capitol Hill, including on the other side of the aisle, to take a look at their budgets. If we're holding both our defense and nondefense budgets to 2006 levels, it's a lot harder for us to do the job that we need to do not only on the national security side, but also here at home, making sure that when our men and women come home, and when they potentially go into civilian life, that they've got a strong economy, that their kids have good schools, that they can send their kids to college, that they get the veterans benefits that they have so richly earned and deserve. That would be a good way for us to express the thanks for the sacrifices they consistently make.

President Ghani. I met yesterday the widow of General Greene. She would like the memory of her husband to be preserved by a sustainable Afghanistan that is secure. The 2,215 Americans that have died must not die in vain. They must leave behind a legacy of a stable Afghanistan. And it's that preservation of those gains that I think inspires the American service men and women to obey the call of their commander, the order of their commanders.

Second, we have taken them out of the harm's way. As the President mentioned, for the past 100 days, because the combat role has ended, the exposure, the number of casualties is

^{*} White House correction.

really down. There isn't—my most horrible reading of the day is my first, middle-of-the-day, and end-of-the-day security reports where I see the casualties of the Afghan figures. But thank God they're no longer American or European casualties.

John Campbell is making sure that they remain in support role. Their train, advise, assist role has risks, but they're nowhere comparable to combat role. And end of that combat role is very significant to this. And again, the institutional gains that would be achieved through the train, advise, and assist role is what will guarantee that the investments of the last 14 years pay off in terms of gains that would ensure.

Last point: Afghanistan is the front line. Because of American engagement in Afghanistan, there have not been attacks on mainland United States. But let's not forget that fortresses cannot be built around countries or continents. We are living in an interconnected world, and our security is joined together.

Afghanistan-U.S. Relations/U.S. Military Operations in Afghanistan/Afghan Security Forces

Q. Thank you very much. Parwiz Kawa from Kabul-based—[inaudible]—Sobh daily newspaper. President Obama, you're talking about the long-term strategic partnership between Afghanistan and United States. At the same time, you're talking about deadlines about the withdrawal of the soldiers from Afghanistan. How do you ensure the long term—or how do you define the long-term strategy partnership after 2017, or from 2017 onward?

[At this point, the reporter spoke in Dari, and his remarks were translated by an interpreter as follows.]

Q. Mr. President Ghani, I wanted to—what do you expect, Mr. President—what would the expectation coming to the United States and what would you like to return with to Afghanistan?

President Obama. Oh, no. Please.

[President Ghani spoke in Dari, and his remarks were translated by an interpreter as follows.]

President Ghani. Our expectations were that our cooperation will be enhanced and we will have a clear vision and practical vision for cooperation—for an enduring cooperation with the United States be there. And this change of environment has occurred, and today, the United States Government and—considers the Government of Afghanistan a really reliable partner.

Commitments that are made are considerable, and the funding proposal of supporting Afghan security forces by 2017 and it has reached to \$4.1 billion. It's nothing less—it's a significant issue, it's a very important issue.

And also, yesterday there was a new framework of our economic cooperation was laid out, according to which \$800 million were made—a commitment were made, those will be spent through the Afghan budget. But most importantly is the flexibility that has been shown in the area of security cooperation. And this flexibility is going to ensure and provide confidence to our security forces and our people and also is going to send a very strong message to the region that this cooperation is not short term, but is enduring and long term.

President Obama. Our strategic partnership is based on a very simple principle. We want the Afghan people, through their security forces directed by their President and Commander

in Chief, to be able to provide for their own security. And our goal is to make sure that we are a strong partner in helping to build and sustain effective Afghan security forces.

So, from the start, when I first came into office, we put additional U.S. troops, coalition troops, and resources into Afghanistan to shift momentum at a time when the Taliban and the enemies of peace and stability inside of Afghanistan, I think, were moving and had momentum.

We broke that momentum, elections took place, and the Afghan National Security Forces began to build up and get trained and become more and more effective. And because of a successful election and a national unity Government and the leadership of President Ghani and Dr. Abdullah, we are now in a position where the Afghan security forces are not only more effective, but they're also better directed by the civilian Government.

We've been able to draw down and remove ourselves from a combat role, as doctor—as President Ghani indicated, without collapse, as was predicted. And Afghan soldiers have fought, and they've fought well. And obviously, there are still improvements to be made, but they're making significant progress.

So the strategic partnership involves us continuing to help support Afghan security forces. That means financially. The international community is going to have to continue to provide assistance to the Afghan Government, which is carrying a significant security load not only for itself, but for the region and, in some ways, the world. And we've made a commitment to do that.

We're going to continue to provide the kind of security cooperation and support that is required—training, assisting, advising, helping on logistics, helping on developing enabler capacity—all the things that go into a modern military, a professional military, a professional police force that can provide security on Afghan soil by Afghans.

And the cooperation and the strategic partnership involves building up the prosperity and opportunities for the Afghan people through the economic development that was mentioned by the President.

So we intend to be working with the Afghan Government and the Afghan people for a long time. And in many ways, our troop presence, our military assistance is just one component of what is a much larger process. And the more successful we are in building Afghan capacity and strengthening the Afghan economy, the more the strategic partnership that we have will be like the partnership that we have with many countries around the world. And it will be based on mutual interest and scientific and educational exchanges and business opportunities and commerce and trade. And that, I think, is the goal that we're all looking for.

Josh Lederman [Associated Press].

Iran/Arab-Israeli Peace Process/Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu of Israel/Israel-U.S. Relations

Q. Thank you, Mr. President. You've made very clear that you're not buying Prime Minister Netanyahu's attempts to walk back the comments that he made before the election, opposing Palestinian statehood and that you're reassessing your approach. What could Prime Minister Netanyahu do, if anything, in the short term to persuade you that he's serious about Israeli-Palestinian peace and that he's an honest broker that you could work with? Or is it too late to repair that relationship during your Presidency? And is there any truth to allegations that Israel was spying on the Iran talks?

And, President Ghani, if I may, you've been working very hard to pursue reconciliation talks with the Taliban, but there's some indications that that's not going so well and that they may not be willing to sit down with you. What makes you hopeful that you can get those talks off the ground? And do you want the U.S. to be involved in those talks?

President Obama. Let me, first of all, address your second question about spying allegations. As a general rule, I don't comment on intelligence matters in a big room full of reporters. [*Laughter*] And I think I'll continue that tradition.

But with respect to the possibility of an agreement that ensures that Iran doesn't get a nuclear weapon, we have not just briefed Congress about the progress or lack thereof that's being made, but we also brief the Israelis and our other partners in the region and around the world. And if in fact an agreement is arrived at that we feel confident will prevent Iran from obtaining a nuclear weapon, it's going to be there for everybody to see. And people are going to be able to lift up the hood and see what's in there.

So I have confidence that if there's an agreement, it's going to be a good agreement that's good for American security and Israeli security and the region's security. And if it isn't, then there probably won't be an agreement. So there will be, I think, significant transparency in the whole process.

With respect to Israel's relations with the Palestinians, I think it's important to understand that the issue here is not what I believe, but it's what the Palestinians and the parties in the negotiations and the Israeli people believe is possible. That's the most important issue. I've said before, and I'll simply repeat: Prime Minister Netanyahu, in the election runup, stated that a Palestinian state would not occur while he was Prime Minister. And I took him at his word that that's what he meant, and I think that a lot of voters inside of Israel understood him to be saying that fairly unequivocally.

Afterwards, he pointed out that he didn't say "never," but that there would be a series of conditions in which a Palestinian state could potentially be created. But of course, the conditions were such that they would be impossible to meet anytime soon. So even if you accepted, I think, the corrective of Prime Minister Netanyahu's in subsequent days, there still does not appear to be a prospect of a meaningful framework established that would lead to a Palestinian state even if there were a whole range of conditions and security requirements that might be phased in over a long period of time, which it was always the presumption.

I don't think anybody ever envisioned in any peace agreement, certainly not one that Prime Minister Netanyahu would agree to or that the Israeli people would agree to, that overnight you suddenly have a Palestinian state right next to Jerusalem and that Israel would not have a whole range of security conditions that had to be met, and that it would be phased in over a long period of time.

So the issue has never been, do you create a Palestinian state overnight? The question is, do you create a process and a framework that gives the Palestinians hope, the possibility, that down the road, they have a secure state of their own, standing side by side with a secure, fully recognized Jewish State of Israel?

And I think—it's not just my estimation—I think it's hard to envision how that happens based on the Prime Minister's statements. And so when I said that we have to now do an evaluation of where we are, it's not in reference to our commitment to Israel's military edge in the region, Israel's security, our intelligence cooperation, our military cooperation. That continues unabated. And I will continue to do whatever I need to do to make sure that our

friends in Israel are safe. That's what I've done since I've been President, and that's not going to stop. And so the Israeli people need to know that.

But I am required to evaluate honestly how we manage Israeli-Palestinian relations over the next several years. Because up until this point, the premise has been, both under Republican and Democratic administrations, that as difficult as it was, as challenging as it was, the possibility of two states living side by side in peace and security could marginalize more extreme elements, bring together folks at the center and with some common sense, and we could resolve what has been a vexing issue and one that is ultimately a threat to Israel as well.

And that possibility seems very dim. That may trigger, then, reactions by the Palestinians that, in turn, elicit counterreactions by the Israelis. And that could end up leading to a downward spiral of relations that will be dangerous for everybody and bad for everybody.

So bottom line, just to summarize here: Number one, our military and intelligence cooperation with Israel will continue unabated, unaffected, and we are absolutely committed to making sure that the Israeli people are safe, particularly from rocket attacks and terrorist attacks aimed on civilians.

Number two, that the evaluation that's taking place is specific to what happens between Israelis and Palestinians going forward. We'll continue to engage the Israeli Government as well as the Palestinians and ask them where they are interested in going and how do they see this issue being resolved. But what we can't do is pretend that there's a possibility of something that's not there. And we can't continue to premise our public diplomacy based on something that everybody knows is not going to happen at least in the next several years. That is something that we have to, for our own—for the sake of our own credibility, I think we have to be able to be honest about that.

And I guess one last point about this, because obviously, I've heard a lot of the commentary: There's a tendency, I think, in the reporting here to frame this somehow as a personal issue between myself and President—Prime Minister Netanyahu. And I understand why that's done, because when you frame it in those terms, the notion is, well, if we all just get along and everybody cools down, then somehow the problem goes away. I have a very businesslike relationship with the Prime Minister. I've met with him more than any other world leader. I talk to him all the time. He is representing his country's interests the way he thinks he needs to, and I'm doing the same.

So the issue is not a matter of relations between leaders; the issue is a very clear, substantive challenge. We believe that two states is the best path forward for Israel's security, for Palestinian aspirations, and for regional stability. That's our view, and that continues to be our view. And Prime Minister Netanyahu has a different approach. And so this can't be reduced to a matter of somehow let's all hold hands and sing "Kumbaya." [Laughter] This is a matter of figuring out, how do we get through a real knotty policy difference that has great consequences for both countries and for the region? Okay?

Q. Will you consider supporting Palestinian statehood at the U.N.?

President Obama. We're going to do that evaluation. We're going to partly wait for an actual Israeli Government to form.

[*President Ghani spoke in English as follows.*]

President Ghani. Peace is our priority. Don't make premature judgments. [Laughter] And what we have asked from the United States, and President Obama has graciously supported it,

is to support an Afghan-led and Afghan-owned peace process. And we are confident that this approach will bear the results in time. Peace is always difficult, and it requires focus, attention, and sacrifice, and that's what we are willing to do to bring it about. Mohmand—[inaudible].

U.S. Military Operations in Afghanistan/Afghan Security Forces/Afghanistan-U.S. Relations

Q. Thank you very much. Mr. President, I've got a question to Mr. Obama. You just mentioned that Afghanistan is still a dangerous place. While it's a dangerous place, is it the right decision to draw down the force level at a time when it's a dangerous place and meanwhile Afghan forces are less equipped and they cannot fight truly?

[The reporter and President Ghani spoke in Pashto, and their remarks were translated by an interpreter as follows.]

Q. Mr. President, my question is, the peace process—what was your initial—or your request from the United States President?

President Ghani. The United States has agreed to—with us that the peace process will be led by Afghans, and Afghans will be—will continue this process, and it will be led by Afghans. And this is obvious for us, and we are thankful for the support.

President Obama. Afghanistan is still a dangerous place. The way it's going to become less dangerous is by Afghan security forces and Afghan police being capable of keeping law and order and security in the country. And that is not going to happen if foreign forces are continually relied upon for the basic security of Afghanistan.

So there are going to be specialized areas where we can cooperate, dealing with some of the most vicious terrorist networks. There's going to be intelligence cooperation and counterterrorism cooperation. And there are going to be specialized areas where we can provide logistical support and training and enabling support.

But the fact is, is that unless Afghan soldiers and Afghan police are able to maintain security, at some point, someday, the United States and other coalition forces would leave. And the good news is, what we've seen as we've removed ourselves from combat roles is the Afghan security forces have stepped up. And although they're certainly not as well equipped as coalition forces, they're better equipped than the Taliban. They're better equipped than the Haqqani network.

And so with the kind of leadership that President Ghani is showing as a Commander in Chief, with the leadership that's being shown by a growing cadre of military officers up and down the military chain, Afghan forces are proving themselves and discovering that, in fact, when they fight, they can be successful. And we want to stand with them in that process because we are very much invested in your success.

So, Mr. President, thank you for an outstanding visit.

President Ghani. Thank you, Mr. President. Thank you.

NOTE: The President's news conference began at 2:30 p.m. in the East Room at the White House. In his remarks, the President referred to Gen. John F. Campbell, USA, commander, Resolute Support and U.S. Forces—Afghanistan; and Jim Yong Kim, President, World Bank. President Ghani referred to Reese Larson, daughter of Lt. Comdr Lonn Larson, USN; and Susan Myers, wife of Maj. Gen. Harold J. Greene, USA, deputy commanding general,

Combined Security Transition Command—Afghanistan, who was killed in Afghanistan on August 5, 2014

Categories: Interviews With the News Media : Joint news conferences :: Afghanistan, President Ghani.

Locations: Washington, DC.

Names: Abdullah, Abdullah; Campbell, John F.; Ghani Ahmadzai, Ashraf; Ghani, Rula; Kim, Jim Y.; Merkel, Angela; Netanyahu, Benjamin; Rajoy Brey, Mariano.

Subjects: Afghanistan : Afghan military and security forces; Afghanistan : Chief Executive Officer; Afghanistan : Democracy efforts; Afghanistan : Former regime; Afghanistan : Insurgency and terrorist attacks; Afghanistan : NATO, role; Afghanistan : President; Afghanistan : Reconciliation efforts; Afghanistan : Relations with Pakistan; Afghanistan : Relations with U.S.; Afghanistan : Security cooperation with U.S.; Afghanistan : U.S. assistance; Afghanistan : U.S. military forces :: Casualties; Afghanistan : U.S. military forces :: Deployment; Armed Forces, U.S. : Military families; Armed Forces, U.S. : Servicemembers :: Service and dedication; Communications : News media, Presidential interviews; Defense and national security : Intelligence; Defense, Department of : Funding; France : Crash of Germanwings Flight 4U9525 near Digne-les-Bains; Germany : Chancellor; Germany : Relations with U.S.; Iran : Nuclear weapons development; Israel : Prime Minister; Israel : Security cooperation with U.S.; Middle East : Arab-Israeli conflict, peace process; Pakistan : Relations with Afghanistan; Spain : Prime Minister; Spain : Relations with U.S.; Terrorism : Al Qaida terrorist group; Veterans : Benefits; World Bank.

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